

VZCZCXRO9367
RR RUEHAST RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHDBU RUEHLH RUEHNEH RUEHPW
DE RUEHCG #0133/01 1280321
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 080321Z MAY 09
FM AMCONSUL CHENNAI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2245
INFO RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 3647
RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 0235
RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 0058
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0216
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 0153
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0148
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 0150
RUEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 0250
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RHMFIUU/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEILB/NCTC WASHINGTON DC
RUEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RUEIDN/DNI WASHINGTON DC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CHENNAI 000133

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: BHARAT BALLOT 09: POLITICAL SUCCESS REQUIRES GRASSROOTS
EFFORT

11. (SBU) Summary: Often lost in the coverage of India's elections are the details of how the process works on the local level. Local political figures in Kerala explained that direct contact with voters is critical. Political parties rely on "booth committees," pulled from extensive networks of local party leaders, to reach out to the country's massive electorate. Booth committee members go village to village and house to house, allowing the parties to make contact with virtually every voter. Another important aspect of Indian democracy is the country's influential Election Commission, which sets rules that govern virtually every aspect of the conduct of campaigning and voting. End summary.

Booth committees get out the vote

12. (SBU) While state- and national-level party leaders dictate which candidates will run in which districts, local political figures actually conduct the campaigns and get out the vote. Several local political leaders explained to us in detail the methods they use to communicate with prospective voters. Indian political parties employ a system combining the iconic large-scale political rallies that Indian elections are known for with a sophisticated, multi-tiered voter contact system based on "booth committees." Local party representatives form a committee for each polling place, which serves as the backbone of efforts to solicit votes. The typical booth committee is responsible for approximately a thousand voters, and its members are prominent people who are well-known to the community. As the political headliners hold large rallies in cities and towns, booth committee members visit each and every home in the rural towns and villages. The booth committees also work to get their party's candidates to visit voters both at home and in the community. The booth committees are the most basic unit of campaign organization; every parliamentary campaign has several layers of committees overseeing the booth committees, each of which plans and executes election activities.

13. (SBU) Among the most important voter outreach activities are small meetings with women in their homes. While men are often working outside the home, and therefore more apt to come into contact with candidates, women are more often working in home-based

businesses or caring for children in the home. Politicians view women voters as a particularly desirable constituency because they reliably cast their votes. In addition to the home visits, political parties organize meetings aimed at giving women the chance to voice their opinions on the issues that are important to them. One of the demands raised by the women of Kerala this election season, we were told, has been equal pay for equal work.

14. (SBU) Candidates keep to grueling schedules made even more difficult as temperatures often soar into the 90s and 100s. During our visit to a village, we witnessed a candidate in the middle of a twenty-five stop day. A typical day includes a variety of events ranging from simple meet-and-greets to town hall-type meetings and speeches. On a stop we observed, the candidate arrived on the back of a campaign jeep which was blaring slogans and music. He was greeted by a brass band and a mixture of eager party campaigners and somewhat perplexed locals. The candidate graciously accepted the offered garlands, shook a few hands, posed for photos, and was then off to the next event.

Election Commission casts a long shadow

15. (SBU) India's Election Commission is an influential force. Candidates and their handlers are acutely aware of the penalties that may be handed down by the Election Commission for violations of the Moral Code of Conduct that governs the election and campaigns. The Commission's mandate is a broad one: it lays down rules on simple issues such as how late events can be held or where signs can be posted, but also bars ruling parties from using government

CHENNAI 00000133 002 OF 002

offices to advance their political campaigns and polices against speech that inflames religious and caste-based tensions. A political operative in neighboring Tamil Nadu told post that "the Election Commission has taken all the fun out of campaigning."

16. (SBU) The most visible sign of the Commission's reach into the Kerala election was the sight of campaign posters covered in black 'X's. Any poster hung without either the permission of the Commission or the owner of the property where it was placed risked being crossed out by the EC. All parties were treated equally, as far as we saw in terms of posters displaying black 'X's. In Andhra Pradesh, we saw a spirited political rally break up promptly at 10:00 p.m. in compliance with the Election Commission's rules on timing of events.

The name game

17. (SBU) Kerala had several instances where candidates with the same, or at least very similar, name as a more popular candidate appeared on the ballot. The homonymous candidate existed solely to undermine the prospects of the more popular candidate. These "ghost" candidates never campaigned, but merely had their names on the ballot in the hopes that they would draw votes from the other candidate. One of our contacts mentioned that this situation had been used against her in a college-level election. While she won the election, it was by a very close margin given the votes that went to the closely named candidate.

Electronic voting machines

18. (SBU) India uses electronic voting machines at all polling stations. Portability and reliability are required given both the number and variety of polling locations. We had a demonstration of one of the machines in Kerala. Each machine has two sections -- a ballot section and a control section -- and fits into a small briefcase-sized container. Polling officials enter the candidate information into the machines prior to the voting date. Each ballot section holds candidate information for up to sixteen candidates. Voters press a large button next to the candidate of their choice and should hear a tone to signify their vote has been registered. At the end of the polling day, the machines are locked and stored until the end of national voting. After counting, results are

stored on machines for up to six months in case there are court proceedings regarding the elections.

19. (SBU) Comment: Analysts often say the lack of "party machinery" makes it difficult for new players to compete in Indian elections. Indian elections are intensely local affairs, and in Kerala we saw first-hand the effort required to mount a grassroots campaign reaching the state's 23 million voters. The major parties, through an expansive network of local party officials working as booth committees, manage to provide individual attention to virtually every voter. This is time-consuming, expensive, and physically exhausting work. Although it goes largely unnoticed in the country's major English language media, this grassroots component is crucial to any political party achieving electoral success in India.
End comment.

KAPLAN